

- Formative Assessment -

What We Mean by Assessment *for* and *of* Learning

Table 2.2 shows our summary of the key differences between assessment *for* and *of* learning. Assessments *of* learning are those assessments that happen after learning is supposed to have occurred to determine if it did. They are used to make statements of student learning status at a point in time to those outside the classroom, as when making student referrals or making decisions about programs. State assessments, local standardized tests, and college admissions tests represent external examinations that do this. But we also conduct assessments *of* learning within the classroom when we gather evidence to determine a student's report card grade. Unit final exams and important projects often serve this purpose.

Assessments *for* learning happen while learning is still underway. These are the assessments that we conduct throughout teaching and learning to diagnose student needs, plan our next steps in instruction, provide students with feedback they can use to improve the quality of their work, and help students see and feel in control of their journey to success. Each one reveals to students increments of achievement and how to do better the next time. On these occasions, the grading function is laid aside. This is not about accountability—those are assessments *of* learning. This is about getting better.

In other words, if we want to use assessment as a tool for learning, students need to

- Know where they're going
- Know where they are now
- Know how to close the gap

You might be thinking assessment *for* and *of* learning sound like formative and summative assessment. If you are, you are correct. Assessment *for* learning is also called "formative" assessment. Assessment *of* learning is also called "summative" assessment.

The Wisdom of Formative Assessment

Assessment is never kept exclusively for the end of a unit. On the contrary, students achieve more with frequent formative assessment throughout the unit.

Many teachers make the mistake of spending considerable energy designing a culminating project or test, but its end-of-unit nature limits impact on student learning. Students can't use the feedback they gain from such assessments to grow. A better use of energy, then, is for teachers to spend considerable time and effort designing and using *formative* assessments offered en route to summative achievements. These frequent checkpoints are where students learn the most. They allow teachers to change course mid-journey, and they keep students and their parents informed—positives all around.

This really is significant. If we rally our resources, creativity, and focus around students' summative experiences, we miss critical opportunities to positively affect learning. When designing a lesson or unit, the wise teacher spends time inserting ideas for formative assessments, making sure they are frequent and substantive, then finds time and inclination throughout the unit to consider those assessments and make instructional changes accordingly. It's not too much, then, for a principal or colleague to pass a teacher in the hallway or stop by his or her classroom and ask, "What's one thing you changed in the last two weeks in your instruction because of something you observed while assessing students?" Or put more directly: "What did you learn about a student today and what did you do with that knowledge?"

Impact of Assessment for Learning

Research evidence gathered around the world shows what happens to student achievement when the principles of assessment for learning permeate the classroom environment. Dozens of studies conducted at all levels of instruction offer evidence of strong achievement gains in student performance as measured by standardized tests (Bloom, 1984; Black & William, 1998; Black, 2003; Meisels, Atkins-Burnett, Xue, Bickel, & Hon, 2003; Rodriguez, 2004). The effect of assessment for learning on student achievement is some four to five times greater than the effect of reduced class size (Ehrenberg, Brewer, Gamoran, & Willms, 2001). Few interventions in education come close to having the same level of impact as assessment for learning.

But the most intriguing result is that, while all students show achievement gains, the largest gains accrue to the lowest achievers. Everyone wins, with those who have the most to win, winning the most.

We're used to thinking about assessment as the measurer of impact of instructional interventions; we implement a new program or teaching strategy and then use assessment to see how effective it was. *In the case of assessment for learning, assessment becomes not only the measurer of impact, but also the innovation that causes change in student achievement; assessment is not just the index of change, it is the change.*

The Goal with Assessment for Learning

Assessment for learning practices use what is known about how the brain works, how we learn, and how we are motivated to maximize learning. Sadler's (1989) set of three requirements—students know where they are going, where they are now, and how to close the gap between the two—establishes the conditions for students to feel in control of their environment. Under these circumstances students can be challenged without being threatened.

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Fair Isn't Always Equal